



Gawler Oral History Project

Your Memory Our History

Transcript of a discussion with Raelene Benier on 21st February 2017.

Interview and transcription by Barry Neylon

Barry: UCare is a non profit community organisation in Gawler. Raelene Benier has been the volunteer coordinator there for many years. Welcome Raelene.

Raelene: thank you

Barry: Can you talk about what UCare does and a bit about its' background.

Raelene: Well, initially our main focus I think is on emergency relief. That is food parcels and food, bread, and vegetables. That is the main thing. We do have offshoots from that. We give them financial counselling, they can get a Nils loan, or a Step Up loan. But the main focus I beleive is emergency relief. That's what we're about.

Barry: So, why do people come and see you? What goes on? What is going on in their lives that drives them through the front door of UCare?

Raelene: Well, I guess Barry the amount of bread we get everyday, which works out to about 400-600 loaves every day, we use that every day. So there are some people that come in that don't really want to see us, they don't want to be acknowledged by us, and so they come in and grab their two loaves of bread. Other people come in for vegetables or fruit because we have fruit and vegetables early in the morning. But you have to be quick to get in here and get that. It goes. We say it sells like hotcakes but we don't sell anything it just goes. And we make sure it

goes to the right people. We have, I don't like to say this but it is the truth, we have the needy and we have the greedy. We have to focus on the needy and we try and work out who the greedy ones' are.

Barry: Any idea of the numbers who might come in on a daily basis?

Raelene: On Monday mornings we would have 60 lined up at the door to start off the day. We have probably a hundred clients a day because we have to get rid of all that bread. It's really hard to work out . I do the statistics and it works out that we look after 800 families a year. That's only in Gawler. When I first started the stats because they didn't really have them back then.... when I started doing the statistics it was just amazing to me that we actually looked after that many people and they come from Gawler. And I thought we were quite a well off little town. But here you go, we are not as well off as we think.

Barry: So you are seeing a side of Gawler that many people are not aware of.

Raelene: No. No. When you go down the streets everything looks hunkydory, and behind the scenes there are kids there well we've got people coming in at half past seven because they have got nothing to give their children for lunch that day and, so, we are servicing that need as well. And that is sad. I mean I could not believe, when I first started, that that sort of thing even happened.

Barry. You see a lot of sad stories. Are there any stories about particular people you can tell in which you think you really have made a difference?

Raelene: Well, we have a lot of people in here under domestic violence or even have some sort of issue like that ... and sometimes there is not a lot I can do to help them ... but sometimes people just need a hug. However we have some really sad stories and, with some of those people I just do not want them to go. So I bring them into my office and we can talk about their issues. Once I start that process we could be talking for a couple of hours but, it is well worth the effort. I can tell you one story ... and I don't need to mention any names but one lady I helped out she had three children, and I went and got the children from school, it was quite a very sad and awful situation, ... put her in a motel. She's quite an intelligent woman. Would you believe that she is now a paramedic. She's training to be a paramedic and her life has completely changed around she didn't look like the girl I saw 5 months before. Totally unrecognizable. In fact she came and said "Raelene, Raelene, it's me." And I said, ... "What!!" I just cannot believe it was the same girl I had been talking to. Her whole life. And I felt then we did do the right thing, because when you do this sort of work you .. think, ... you know you are breaking up a family and you think .. " Oh Dear! This is not the way it should be". But sometimes that is the way it has to be. So, I felt quite gratified and, it is surprising, how many people are out there, including women, living in their cars or on the streets. There is quite a lot.

Barry: In Gawler?

Raelene: In Gawler. They come in here. Some guys come in two or three times a week for a shower. I have a lady that comes in at least once a week for a shower. I don't know what she does during the other time, but she must travel around. And they just come in to have a shower and to do their washing. And we provide that at UCare. So, it's all good that we can provide that but, it's pretty sad to think that we've got so many people living on the streets.

Barry: It's quite an awakening actually. For those people where you have made that difference, how do you feel when you get that feedback?

Raelene: That day when she told me she was back at university doing a paramedic degree because she already had the marks she needed from uni ...it it make's it allit makes it worth coming in in the morning now ... to think that "yes, I can make a difference" ... and that's not the first person I was able to help.

We have got a whole team. There is a whole team behind us that do a lot of the work. And just to think that we have helped all those people, and, you know, as I said before, sometimes they just need a hug. And we've got the girls behind there that want to do that work. And that's what we do.

Barry: You mentioned domestic violence. It's certainly getting a lot of needed publicity at the moment. Are there any observations you have about what you see in Gawler about that issue. How it impacts on UCare.

Raelene: Well the main issue is when they leave the family home. It's usually the girls that leave the family home because the guy doesn't want them to have the keys and things like that. There is more than we actually think. I probably have at least one every week.... At least.

And then there are other people I talk to who can maybe can work out there problems themselves. And it's surprising as well that men have the same sort of problems. So, I was only talking to a guy the other day that has the same problem ... so we had to find him a house to live. It's not just one sex. It's both. And that flabbergasted me. It's something I had never thought about really.

Barry: And, are you seeing more of these?

Raelene: We are seeing a lot more a lot more. I had four interviews last month for domestic violence. So that tells you a story. That's an hour to two hours for each of those clients... I can give them the advice... I can show them, and give them different cards, and information,.. about different agencies, ..various people, I can give them the phone .. to call people that can help them. So that's pretty important as well. Just so they know. Because I am not an expert. I have never trained in that sort of thing but I can certainly hand them over to someone who does know what to do.

Barry: You are a volunteer yourself, and you have a large team of volunteers, and I know that you are very proud of them. And I'm sure there are challenges and headaches in managing a group like this, but can you tell us a story about some of your volunteers where maybe being a volunteer at UCare has made a difference in their lives.

Raelene: Volunteering is quite good fun, and you don't have the responsibility. It's just like any ordinary everyday job. You still have to do what you have been told to do basically. Volunteers are just wonderful. We have 42 here working at the moment. We need all of those of course. There are kitchen staff, reception staff, and the guys in the financial counselling and things like that, and of course there are lots of people needed in the kitchen every morning, and we have to think about the people bringing the bread. Collecting the bread. Collecting the vegetables. And that sort of thing.

Barry: Talk to us about the kitchen staff. What is going on there?

Raelene: Well, I just want to talk about something else if you don't mind. We also have Work for the Dole. So we've got people coming in now that actually do Work for the Dole. We have just had two guys working in reception. They were wonderful. One guy. He's done psychiatry. He has not been able to get a job. So he worked for us and now he's actually got a job. So, just having that 6 months working here he's been able to get into employment. Not where he wants to be but he's actually found paid work so that's great. And another guy, he actually came back volunteering after he had finished, and now he's fine as well.

To get back to the kitchen staff, we also have them as well. The kitchen staff start at 6 o'clock in the morning to pick up bread. So you've got to be mad to get up at 6 to pick up bread (laughter).

Barry: Let's just remind ourselves here. We have volunteers getting up at 6.

Raelene: Yes 6 o'clock. To go and collect bread from different places. And they arrive back here around 6.37 when there is a team of 4-5 people, or say 3-4 maybe to start packing it. The bread is unpacked so we have to have our gloves and hats on and things like that, and pack up the bread into their plastic bags and then put it out for our clients to get it.

Then we have a truck that arrives in about 11 o'clock every morning and .. we ... the guys have to unpack that and work out where all that produce has to go. Oh! and we also have Second Bite. Second Bite we pick up around about 7 o'clock and that's all the left over food from Coles which is really wonderful of Coles to do that for us. We pick up lot's of vegetables and left over bread. We have mountains of bread.

Dedicated staff and, of course, work for the dole. Now work for the dole I have to say has been quite successful. The guys. Some guys don't want to start. One guy started last week and turned up in thongs. I had to send him home. He came back. He worked for an hour and that was the end of his whole working life I think. Other

guys come in. They work. They work their little butts off. And they sometimes most times will find work. They can find paid work. It's all good, and it's a good learning experience for us and for them. Because they have to fill out time sheets.

Barry: Work for the dole here and there get's quite a bit of criticism, but through UCare obviously it's ...

Raelene: Well it's working. Like I said... if they don't turn up the next day I know not to bother. (laughter) And that does happen. But all in all the guys we have had, have been just a dream , really wonderful blokes and girls. So, it's been really good.

Barry: Can we go back to that food. That's a lot of food that you prepare. Where does some of that food go?

Raelene: We have about 2000 kilograms of food come in every month. And that is just from Coles. Oz Harvest ... we would have similar, if not more. The vegetables are on their last legs, so the kitchen staff volunteers actually sort it as to what should go out the front. The policy is .. "if you wouldn't eat it we wouldn't give it to our clients". That's the way to go, and of course you have got to be checking for problems anyway so it's got to be quality food without being off or anything like that.

Barry: Did I hear a rumour once that you were helping out with schools.

Raelene: No, that's not a rumour. (laughter) We also have a volunteer who takes our school breakfast program to Gawler Primary, Evanston and the big school Gawler College B-12. So we do those. They were getting some food from Second Bite last year. But we still supplemented their milk and bread, and this year they have lost that, unfortunately, and we are doing the lot again. And last year we did Blakeview and Craigmores Schools as well. But this year there is no one to deliver the food so we are not doing it. So bad luck ... but it will be cheaper for us. Can I say there .. that the money we get from pancake day is what we use to fund the school breakfast program. The 28th is pancake day.

Barry: I think that leads into the next area I really wanted to talk to you about. You are a volunteer yourself. You are doing really important work with your team of volunteers. You do this 5 days a week.

Raelene: Yes I do. 5 days a week I'm here at 7.30 every morning. The reason I am here then is to ensure that everything in the kitchen is running smoothly. I don't know why. I just felt my presence made a difference in the way things were done and not bignoting myself at all because I'd rather be in bed to be perfectly honest (laughter). And then I work through to 4.

Barry: So, what motivates you. Very few people work as volunteers 5 days a week. There are a lot of volunteers in our community but you are the only one I know that does it 5 days a week.

Raelene: It's sad but I have no grandchildren. (laughter). Well the grandchildren I have live in Tasmania and one is 21 and the other is 14 now. So, they don't really need grandma. And I thought this was something I could do ... and it was never meant to end up like this. It just happened. I started off working in reception 9.30 till 3 two days a week. And next thing you know I'm doing three days .. and then I found out it might be good if I could do some of the loans that were here. And things like that. The Nils Loans and Step Up Loans, and I got into that so there's another few days ...and then I just loved it so much that I couldn't help myself. So now then...after awhile I got my husband into it as well. So he does a lot of picking up and deliveries. So now it's just a UCare family ... and my son's are saying .. "Mum it's time you retired" (laughter). But no, I am still here.

Barry: well it's clearly a big part of your life And I am just wondering if we might be able to go back in time and just reflect on Raelene as a young girl, young woman and ... can you tell us basically where you grew up, a bit about your schooling.

Raelene: Actually I was brought up at Woodville North. I went to Pennington Primary School and my mother went to Pennington Primary as well. I went to Woodville High. When I left Woodville High School I actually worked at Myer in their ledger department. Looks like I've always had a bit of a flair for numbers. And then I transferred to, would you believe, Timer Fashions in Gawler. So I worked for them for a few years under Ken Jacobs. I used to work well I still talk to Ruth, to Claire Rundall, shall I say ... I still talk to her. And so we started there. And when Geoff and I got married at St George's Church in Gawler we after a stint in Woomera, we ended up in Western Australia, in Karratha. So that's where I found my passion.

Barry: Is that right. Talk us through that. What happened there?

Raelene: I always liked figures and liked numbers, but the guys there were trainee accountants, and accountants, and I started a diploma course and they said "Oh no, you can't do a diploma, look at your results, you've got to do a degree". I started a degree. I never finished that degree by the way. My son in Year 12 seemed to need me more than ever so I didn't I decided he was more important than me ... so lets do it this way. I was already the accountant at the Seven Mile and for Rio Tinto in Dampier in Western Australia.

Barry: That's a huge responsibility I would think, in a very male dominated community being the accountant. Talk about what's going on there.

Raelene: Well it was very male dominated. Back in that era that would have been the 80's. It was just circumstance. I got on with everybody. I don't know what it was all about. But the guys I just got on with ... they liked me I had a petty cash float of \$10,000....so I must have been trusted.

And then ... to be the accountant out there was just a dream come true. "Raelene Benier accountant " on the door. And then from there I was asked to move down to Perth to be the Systems Administrator or the Systems Manager. So I looked after

and developed, assisted to develop, a new system for the iron ore invoicing in different currencies of the world. So I actually wrote the Manual for that.

Barry: This is the young girl who went to Pennington Primary, you end up in Karratha

Raelene: Yes I did that. And then another thing I did while I was working for Hammersley ... I must have always had these little things on the side ... it was just my way ... I used to look after Young Achievers. That's for all different colleges in Perth. And one year I looked after Scotch College in Perth and we won that year. And I guess the highlight there was talking in front of the Premier of WA and about 500 people in the audience. That was awesome.

And also working and doing that work I did for Rio Tinto ... another great opportunity I had is that all the accountants from Rio Tinto came to WA. We went to Rottnest Island and a team of us had to talk about how we could implement an Accounts Payable system a lot better. This was before EFT (electronic funds transfer) and we still had cheques. And we developed a way to pay people by EFT.

Barry: Let me clarify things here. You are actually having a very significant influence on accounting practices and I am pretty sure you mentioned that you don't have an accounting degree.

Raelene: Correct. I don't have a degree.

Barry: well done

(laughter)

Barry: Clearly your colleagues, when you are doing this stuff, are many qualified accountants.

Raelene: They were all qualified. There was just little old me. But I think I had their respect maybe I knew what I was talking about ... (laughter) I don't know. Sometimes these things just happen.

Barry: Inspiring story.

Raelene: Things just happen. Who would have thought that Raelene Benier from Pennington High School could be the Administrator of UCare. That is awesome.

Barry: And that leads into our next question. You are over in WA being extremely busy and you end up eventually back in Gawler running UCare. Explain that transition.

Raelene: Well! Gosh that was a pretty horrible story really in a way. My husband got very ill, very ill. And he had already gone through about well we thought he had prostate cancer, ... and miracle of miracles that disappeared ... and then

we found that he had a micro tumour in his pituitary gland and he was really quite fortunate that he had a very good specialist and they were able to find this micro tumour.

But Geoff felt that he needed to be back in South Australia with his family. He's got 9 brothers and sisters and I have 7 brothers and sisters. I think he thought it was time for us to come back and be with our families. So we had actually already bought a house over the net (laughter) to come back to Gawler. So we bought a house over the net. My sister lives at Willaston and I asked her to go and look at the house. She said it looks pretty good and, so, that's what we did. Since then we've built a brand new home in Gawler East with our son.

Barry: An unfortunate circumstance brought you back. You are in the home you bought. And then you start at UCare. What attracted you to UCare? How did that all happen?

Raelene: Right. When we came back to Adelaide I thought I have to get a job because I am still able to work and I am not going to stay at home. I can't stay at home. I am not that sort of person. Otherwise Geoff wouldn't be able to walk on the floors at home because I would have them too clean apparently. So, it doesn't work in our family ... so Raelene goes to work. What happened was I got a job with BHP Billiton back in my proper field and I worked for them. And I kept on falling over. I had to have a knee replacement. After the knee replacement I thought.... "what am I going to do now?" Then I thought instead of getting the train every day at 7.04 and the 5.05 for going home lets work somewhere else. So, I drove my car to British Aerospace and I worked there. Then my other knee went. So I thought that must be enough for me. I had to get the knee done again and all that sort of thing. So ... when it came time to go back to work again I thought yeh! can't use your super yet. (laughter) What am I going to do? So, I rang up Northern Volunteering and they said "oh! a jobs come in today for UCare for reception work." I said "well that sounds great I could do that". And that's how I didn't know I had no idea this sort of thing happened ... I didn't know this sort of thing even existed.

Barry: This is your first experience at dealing with people who are down on their luck.

Raelene: I had no idea. I'm sorry. I was just so naive. I did not know that this sort of thing existed. So it was a well it really opened my eyes. ... "Do people come in and grab bread?" ... What? ...You know! ... And then .. they are allowed to have two parcels a year. Really!! But why? Why? I mean ... why? What's wrong? Why don't people have enough money? and it was quite!

Barry: So, like a lot of people in our community we just don't see

Raelene: I didn't know. I just didn't know this sort of thing went on. Then of course when I spoke to my sister in law about it she said ... "Yeh Raelene, that's what

happens". Just naive. Didn't know. Honestly didn't know. I feel ashamed that I didn't know. Otherwise maybe I could have helped in some other way.

Barry: And that's what you have been doing for the last 8 years, 5 days a week. Although I think you were telling me it's now 6 days a week.

Raelene: Well it's 6 days a week now because we come in on Saturdays to collect food again from Oz Harvest, because they have collected food from the markets at Nuriootpa. So now we get a different lot of foods coming in on Saturday afternoon which is just wonderful. Milk and cheese and even ice cream last week. I don't know how they managed that ... the guys. But there is a team of people that live up that way and they are volunteers from Oz Harvest that decide to pick it up. So, more bread, more food, more everything which is just wonderful. So we can give out more food to our Gawler residents. That's another story.

Barry: Raelene that is another story and I was thinking we should talk again about some aspects of your history which are interesting, but, before we finish up the interview today I wonder if I can ask you you've been doing the job now for 8 years ... are you seeing the same sort of issues you had with clients 8 years ago or are they the same ... plus new ones occurring?

Raelene: No. I would think that we see new ones'. What we like to see is people come in here. We give them financial counselling or we give financial literacy or something like that and they change. So our clients move on or we have a new lot of people. But I would say it would be 60/40 at the moment.

So 60% would be repeat clients and 40 would be the other or new clients that come in. So, yeh I think that would be about right. It's males and females. Females would be more than the males of course because of children and they have got the time to come in. But mostly females and the turn over is amazing. Amazing.

So every month we give out ... we have bags of vegetables to give out every day that we actually pay for and there would be 400 a month given out as that. We do up 25 bags a day and they all go. And the same person can not get the same vegetables bag the next day.

Barry: There is clearly a lot of work in all this and very important. One other area should ask you about is that power prices are in the news every day. Does that impact on the people that you see?

Raelene: It certainly does. A lot of the people because they are not so well off the fridges are old, the washing machines are old, they don't usually have air conditioning and if they do it's old. So, therefore, the energy consumption is up. So, therefore we are seeing bills, which I think is a lot, of \$800 - \$1200 every three months. To me that is a lot because my bills are 3 - 400 depending on the time of the season, and we are a family of four because my son lives on one side of the house and we live on the other. So there are four adults living in the house and to see some of these bills coming in and they are paying it by smoother cards or

they are not paying it at all, or, and they live in old houses so there is all that sort of thing going on. They are already disadvantaged and then they are disadvantaged again because they have old equipment. This is where our Nils Loans come in handy. Because Nils loan are no interest and they can borrow up to \$1200 and they can get a new washing machine, a new fridge. And if they do that one at a time you can see actually the difference in the power consumption and that is going down.

Barry: Well Raelene can I say that it has been a delight to talk to you today. And to hear some of those stories of people down on their luck but more importantly your story ... so thank you very much.

Raelene ... thank you.